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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal conflict in organizations is due to differences in perception of organizational sub-group systems operations. Such conflict can be reduced through implementation of "PET," perception expansion training. PET procedures will determine the dimensions of conflict situations and bring into play interacting group therapy which expands the perception of the group members. The result is decreased conflict tension. PET has applications in government, commerce--especially labor-management relations--and in tense racial situations. (CH)

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PERCEPTION EXPANSION TRAINING:

AN APPROACH TO CONFLICT REDUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

Examination of any large organization will show the existence of several specialized subsystems. The goals or objectives of the organization are attained by each subsystem completing and achieving their individual tasks. However, each subsystem must do more than merely complete its own task; it must coordinate its task functioning with the task functioning of the other subsystems in order to achieve the objectives of the organization. Frequently, these subsystems in an organization can also provide the basis for conflict. For example, the particular subsystem a person belongs to in an organization may cause that person to view organizational activity from an entirely different frame of reference than someone who occupies a position in another subsystem within the same organization. Indeed, differences in perception are a major cause of conflict within the organizational setting.

The thrusts of this paper are to 1) examine briefly the concepts of differentiation and integration within the organizational setting, 2) consider the role that perception plays in producing conflict, and 3) discuss Perception Expansion Training (PET) as an approach to conflict reduction.

I.

Each subsystem within an organizational system must be differentiated around a primary task if it is to be viable internally. The subsystems performing discrete tasks must be integrated if the organization is to accomplish its goals. Rice describes the process of differentiation in the following

way:

> The differentiation of operating systems depends upon the discovery of subsystems with discrete primary tasks. Successive orders of differentiation can continue until primary production systems are reached . . . the viability of any grouping of subsystems for command purposes depend upon the group having a discrete primary task that differentiates it from other groups of the same order of differentiation, and from groups at higher or lower levels of differentiation.[1]

Thus, the need for differentiation is clearly seen in any large organization.

The subsystems which an organization may be divided into will vary according to the type of organization. Because of the limited scope of this paper and the importance of industry in our society, only the industrial organization will be examined. There is a general tendency in all "large industrial enterprises for activities to be divided into three basic subsystems: Research, Production, and Sales."[2] The activities of these basic subsystems are further described by Wilfred Brown: "[Research] decides what goods or services they seek to provide . . . [Production] arranges for the provision of some good or service . . . [Sales] arrange for the sale of the goods or services."[3] For an

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[1]A. K. Rice, The Enterprise and Its Environment (London: Tavistock Publications, 1963), p. 225.

[2]Jay Lorsch, Product Innovation and Organization (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1965), p. 7.

[3]Wilfred Brown, Exploration in Management (London: Heinemann, 1960), pp. 143-145.

industrial organization to achieve its goals and objectives, it must be differentiated along these lines. Indeed, even within these major subsystems there are many smaller subsystems.

However, if the organization as a whole is to "be effective in performing its overall task, a means must be provided to integrate the activities of these differentiated systems."[4] The means of integration are either internal or external. The former have been an integral part of most organizations for a long period of time, while the latter is a relatively recent innovation. An example of an internal method would be the liasion specialists whose job is "to move across linguistic and functional frontiers and to act as intermediaries between the people getting on with the job."[5] External methods involve the outside training of individuals in an organization in a manner designed to change their behavior so that they might complete the tasks of the organizations more effectively.

Frequently, however, despite efforts to integrate the various subsystems in an organization, various degrees of conflict will emerge. As stated earlier, the task one performs in an organization plays an important role in shaping his frame of reference. At this point it is appropriate to examine in more detail the role that perception plays in conflict.

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[4] Lorsch, p. 2.

[5] T. Burns and G. Stalker, The Management of Innovation (London: Tavistock Publications, 1961), p. 9.

II.

To understand how differences in perception can develop and lead to conflict, one must be aware of the process of perception, that is, the process of recognizing and identifying things in our environment. Taguiri in his work has emphasized person perception, the recognition and identification of other people. He cites three major elements in the perception process -- "The situation in which the person to be judged is embedded," the person "apart from the situation," and "the perceiver."[6] Not all of the information about the situation and the person to be perceived even reaches the perceiver. Factors such as past contact, frequency of contact, and the relationship between the perceiver and the perceived may limit what is "seen." Moreover, the perceiver does not respond to all the stimuli that do reach him because the stimulus potential of nearly every environment is too great for a person to perceive everything; the perceiver selects what stimuli to which he will respond. In addition to this process of selection, the individual perceiver performs the function of accentuation. Accentuation simply means that certain momentary needs may cause certain stimuli to stand out more clearly and be more compelling than they normally would.[7] In brief, the perceiver selects and emphasizes only part of the total set of stimuli which confront him on any given occasion.

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[6]Renator Taguiri and Luigi Petrollo, Person, Perception and Interpersonal Behavior (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1958), p. xiv-xv.

[7]Ronald Fogus, Perception (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966), p. 254.

The fact that individuals select and emphasize only a portion of the total stimuli available to them has been supported by several empirical studies. For example, Dearborn and Simon studied a group of twenty-three executives classified as "middle management" and found that "each executive will perceive those aspects of a situation that relate specifically to the activities and goals of his department."[8] Korman reached a similar conclusion in his study of navy clerks and radiomen; he concluded that "selective perception in this sense appears to be as true of these relatively low level supervisors as it was of the executives in the Dearborn and Simon study."[9] Another example of selective perception resulting in conflict is provided by a study dealing with a large textile mill. The textile mill allowed conflict to develop that resulted in a high labor turnover. The mill had informed employees when they were hired that it gave automatic raises each year and merit raises for deserving employees after nine and eighteen months; the employees, however, perceived that they should receive an automatic raise at <u>all three</u> of these periods. When they did not obtain their raises, many of them quit because they thought that the employer had not maintained his original promise to grant wage increases. The differences between employee and employer perception clearly led to conflicting views in this case.[10]

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[8]Dewitt Dearborn and Herbert Simon, "Selective Perception: A Note on the Departmental Identifications of Executives," <u>Sociometry</u>, XXI (1958), p. 142.

[9]Abraham Korman, "Selective Perception Among First Line Supervisors," <u>Personnel Administrator</u>, XXVI (Sept., 1963), p. 35.

[10]Lewis Benton, "The Many Faces of Conflict: How Differences in Perception Cause Differences of Opinion," <u>Supervisory Management</u>, XV (March, 1970), p. 8.

A word of caution, however, must be included to prevent overstating the relationship between perception and conflict. Korman warns that "selective perception, while occuring, is not all pervasive and should not be used as a 'catch all' explanation to explain all conflict in all areas of the organizational environment."[11] Moreover, Corwin argues that some conflict should be attributed to the organizational situation itself. He shows that increases in conflict are positively correlated with such factors as the increase in hierarchy, the increase in standardization, and increases in the number of workers.[12] This word of caution, however, should not be taken to minimize the importance of the relationship between perception and conflict. At best, the arguments put forth by Korman and Corwin indicate only that perception cannot explain all conflict situations. What should be clear at this point is the fact that different people have different perceptions of the world around them. When these differences of perception become great enough they can lead to conflict.

III.

At this point we have established that organizations are composed of subsystems, that these subsystems can lead to differences in perception and in turn to conflict. At this point we are ready to examine the concept of Perception

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[11]Abraham Korman, "Selective Perception Among First Line Supervisors," p. 36.

[12]Ronald Corwin, "Patterns of Organizational Conflict," Administrative Science Quarterly, XIV (Dec., 1969), pp. 507-520.

Expansion Training (PET) as an approach to conflict reduction. The concept of PET contains two centers of gravity. First, the parties involved in the conflict need to clearly identify the major differences in perception or, to put it another way, they need to identify the dimensions of the conflict. Second, the parties involved need to interact with each other on the major dimensions of the conflict. At this juncture we are in a position to examine PET by first considering a method for determining the dimensions of conflict and second a consideration for promoting interaction that can lead to a reduction of conflict.

Identifying the Dimensions of Conflict

The method described here to identify the dimensions of a conflict situation is known as the "nominal group method." Suppose labor and management are involved in some type of conflict. Representatives from each group would meet separately in groups ranging from 6-9 in size. Each group of representatives would then participate in the three stages of the nominal group procedure as it is outlined below.

Stage I

First, employees from the organization being analyzed are met in groups ranging in size from six to nine employees. The employees, once they are brought into the meeting room, are requested not to speak to each other. Thus, the reason for the term nominal group -- the employees are in a group setting but no verbal action is permitted. Second, after the group has been seated around a table, each employee is asked to write on a prepared form what he sees as "major problems" in the conflict area under consideration. The

employees are given approximately ten minutes to list problem dimensions in the conflict area.

Stage II

After the group has individually listed problems, the consultant in charge of the group asks a member of the group to read to the group one of the problems. The problem is then written down with a felt tip pen on a large paper pad in front of the group. The consultant in charge then proceeds around the group to receive one item from the next person in sequence and he numbers each item as he writes the problems on the large paper pad. This process is continued until each employee in the group has exhausted his list of problems and all of the problems are listed on the large pad of paper in front of the group. When an item is put on the paper pad that other members have also listed, they are instructed not to repeat the item again and in this way each problem is listed only once on the master list of problems. The list is then taped to the wall in front of the group so that all group members can see the problems. At this point the list of problems is carefully studied to remove any items that overlap with any other items.

Stage III

At this point the group members are asked to examine the list carefully and then rank order the problems, ranking the most serious problem 1, the next most serious 2, and so on. They are also instructed to rank the problems without consulting other members in their group. If the list of problems is extremely long, the group members would only be asked to rank what they consider to be

the top five problems. After the group members have voted on the problems, this information is collected and tabulated. All three stages can be completed in about one hour.

When used in this way, the nominal group serves as a method for identifying problems that are associated with the conflict area and also allows for the establishment of priorities as to which problems are the most serious.[13]

Rationale for the Nominal Group Method

Much of the recent experimental literature indicates that the nominal group is a more effective method for identifying the major dimensions of a problem than is the interacting group.[14] My purpose here is only to briefly summarize the major reasons which support the idea that the nominal group is a more effective method of identifying dimensions of a problem, since a more complete analysis has been presented elsewhere.[15] Three major factors support the nominal group approach.

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[13]This description of the nominal group method is adapted from Richard C. Huseman, "Defining Communication Problems in the Organizational Setting," Journal of Organizational Communication (Summer, 1972), pp. 18-20.

[14]Donald W. Taylor, Paul C. Berry, and Clifford H. Block, "Does Group Participation When Using Brainstorming Facilitate or Inhibit Creative Thinking?" Administrative Science Quarterly, Vol. 3, 1958, pp. 23-47; Victor H. Vroom, Lester D. Grant and Timothy S. Cotton, "The Consequences of Social Interaction in Group Problem Solving," Organization Behavior and Human Performance, Vol. 4, 1969, pp. 77-95.

[15]Andre Delbecq and Andrew Van de Ven, "A Group Process Model for Problem Identification and Program Planning," Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 7, 4, 1971, pp. 466-492.

First, there is evidence that interacting groups inhibit the effectiveness of their members in generating the dimensions of the problem being discussed. Even when the group leader encourages the individuals to speak freely and share their ideas, the research suggests that most individuals only feel comfortable in sharing well-developed and well-thought out ideas with the group.[16] This kind of reluctance may result in important dimensions of the problem never emerging in the group. The problem is intensified in newly formed groups where the members do not know each other well. Another part of this problem that we have mentioned earlier is the fact that one or two strong members in the interacting group may dominate and keep other less powerful individuals from suggesting important dimensions of the problem. The nominal procedure does not permit verbal interaction and the tendency for powerful individuals to control the group is minimized.

Second, sometimes interacting groups tend to start evaluating and elaborating on some of the early problem dimensions and as a result some of the important dimensions of the problem area are never brought to the attention of the group. The nominal procedure, on the other hand, avoids evaluating and elaborating comments while the dimensions of the problem are being identified since no verbal interaction is permitted between members of the group. This factor is supported by research on creative groups and identification of problem dimensions.[17]

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[16]Donald W. Taylor, Paul C. Berry and Clifford H. Block.

[17]Norman R. F. Maier, Problem-Solving Discussions and Conferences (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963), pp. 248-249.

Third, there is a tendency of interacting groups to focus on one particular train of thought and not attempt to identify all of the problem dimensions. Many individuals find it much easier to react to someone else's idea rather than articulating their own. This problem becomes more severe when you realize that the early dimensions identified by the interacting group usually contain the obvious rather than the more subtle aspects of the problem.[18] The nominal method, on the other hand, forces each individual to identify as many of the dimensions of the problem as he can and in this way he is not permitted the luxury of simply reacting to dimensions generated by others in the group.

In addition to the three factors above that support the nominal group as superior to the interacting group in identifying the dimensions of a problem, there is a final statement provided by Maier and Hoffman that suggests why it is important to emphasize the understanding of all dimensions of the problem rather than quickly moving to a solution. "It appears to be a human tendency to seek solutions even before the problem is understood. This tendency to be 'solution minded' seems to become even stronger when there is anxiety over the nature of the decision."[19] Exploring all of the major dimensions of the problem is enhanced by the use of the nominal method.

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[18] Marvin D. Dunnette, John Campbell and Kay Jaastad, "The Effect of Group Participation on Brainstorming Effectiveness for Two Industrial Samples," Journal of Applied Psychology, Vol. 47, No. 1, 1963, pp. 30-37.

[19] N. R. F. Maier and L. R. Hoffman, "Quality of First and Second Solution Group Problem Solving," Journal of Applied Psychology, 1960, 44, pp. 278-283.

The nominal group, then, provides a method for minimizing many of the problems of the typical interacting group and focuses the attention of the group upon the dimensions of the conflict at hand.

Interacting on the Dimensions of the Conflict

The second major component of PET is that once the major dimensions of the conflict between the two parties have been identified, representatives of the two groups involved in the conflict are brought together in an interaction format. The basis for using the intereaction format is found in the idea that exposure of an individual to a stimulus is a sufficient condition for the modification of his attitude toward it. By mere exposure we refer to a condition which makes a given stimulus accessible to an individual's perception.

The beginnings of this hypothesis date back as far as the 1890's in the works of William James:

> We are once for all so made that when certain impressions come before our mind, one of them will seem to call for or repel the others as its companions. When a conjunction is repeatedly experienced, the cohesion of its terms grows grateful . . .[20]

In 1937, A. H. Maslow mentions in one of his early studies that "sheer repetition . . . may result in greater liking for the familiar thing or activity."[21]

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[20]William James, The Principles of Psychology (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1896), p. 672.

[21]A. H. Maslow, "The Influence of Familiarization on Preference," Journal of Experimental Psychology, 21 (1937), p. 162.

However, an extensive examination of the exposure-attitude hypothesis was completed only recently.

Robert Zajonc sought to support the hypothesis by presenting and reviewing four types of evidence:[22] 1) the correlation between affective connotation of words and word frequency; 2) the effects of experimentally manipulated frequency of exposure upon the affective connotation of nonsense words and symbols; 3) the correlation between word frequency and the attitude to their referents; 4) the effects of experimentally manipulated frequency of exposure on attitude. The length of this paper does not lend itself to an extensive elaboration of Zajonc's paper. However, an appraisal of his hypothesis does seem in order.

The evidence on the word value-frequency of words in language[23] is interpretable in terms of a more general psycholinguistic principle than a specific attitude enhancement by mere exposure hypothesis. Also, the set of studies cited on aesthetic appreciation[24] as supportive material involve conditions of exposure too complex to be of conclusive value to a "mere exposure" hypothesis. With respect to evidence presented by Zajonc as a whole, one aspect of the exposure-attitude hypothesis is supported -- the decrease in "badness"

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[22] Robert Zajonc, "Attitudinal Effects of Mere Exposure," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology Monograph Supplement, Vol. 9, [illegible] (June, 1968), pp. 1-27.

[23] Ibid., p. 3-17.

[24] Ibid., p. 2.

of initially "bad" stimuli and subsequent increase in "goodness" with repeated or additional exposure.[25] However, the effect of exposure on initially good stimuli remains to be determined.

In a PET session the participants are exposed to the stimuli of the other parties in the conflict. The relationship between social interaction and attitude enhancement is thus seen to be similar to that which is characteristic of all social processes, a dynamic intereaction among the components.[26] Attitude is not the only aspect of this process that undergoes change; the nature of interaction changes as well. I believe that the underlying basis of attitude enhancement by social interaction is the broadening of the perceptual field of those involved in the interaction. Social interaction forces an individual to perceive or at least try to perceive the framework from which the other individual or individuals operate. This can be a conscious, but is usually an unconscious, act for most individuals. As the individual's perceptual field expands, he discovers information which contradicts his attitudes. But because he himself discovered the information and the integration of this information is vital to the role of his social interaction with the other individual, it becomes necessary

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[25] For a similar appraisal see Leon Jakobovits, "Effects of Mere Exposure: A Comment," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology Monograph Supplement, Vol. 9, No. 2 Part 2 (June, 1968), pp. 30-32.

[26] For a further discussion and support of attitude enhancement by social information, see P. H. Tannenbaum and R. W. Gengel, "Generalization of Attitude Change Through Congruity Principle Relationships," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, #3, (1966), pp. 299-304.

for him to modify his attitude into a position of congruence with the new information. The degree of attitude enhancement is then directly related to the amount of social interaction (exposure).

SUMMARY

Earlier we attempted to establish that some forms of interpersonal conflict in organizations are due to differences in perception. As a means of reducing that type of conflict we have suggested a procedure described as perception expansion training. Essentially, PET has two major thrusts. First, the nominal group procedure is used to accurately determine what are the major dimensions of the conflict. Second, an interacting group is used to expand the perception of the groups and thus reduce the conflict. Of major importance is the skill of the consultant in charge of the interacting group.

In this paper we have discussed PET as a means of reducing conflict. This author has found the method to be useful with labor and management groups as well as groups in government and has also employed it in tense situations of racial conflict.

In addition to reducing conflict, PET has an interesting potential as it relates to organizational development but that topic is being pursued on another occasion.